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What are we **learning about...?**

Establishing a network of schools

Facilitating learning networks

A development tool designed to explore the
processes of establishing a network of schools.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

Acknowledgements

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Networked Learning Group, Lead Developers**

Facilitating learning networks

This development tool aims to support the effective facilitation of learning networks, particularly where there is the extra challenge of working with people who may be known to you as colleagues, but not at all familiar as co-learners.

The tool consists of two activities:

This tool is intended to be used to help explore some of the key dimensions of the facilitation of school networks. In particular, the activities are designed to examine what effective facilitation looks like in practice and to provide a useful starting point for planning network activity at the early stages of a network's development. □

1 Focuses on six aspects of network activity which benefit from facilitation:

- 1 Planning
- 2 Meaning
- 3 Challenge
- 4 Feeling
- 5 Structuring
- 6 Valuing

Heron, 1999¹

2 Focuses on the practice of effective facilitation by:

- Identifying some of the enablers and barriers to effective facilitation in school networks.
- Describing some of the characteristics of the facilitation of collaborative learning in networked contexts.
- Providing an opportunity to challenge some assumptions about effective facilitation in networked learning situations.

¹ Heron, J, 1999, *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook*, London, Kogan Page

Activity 1: Six aspects of facilitation in networks

Most thinkers about facilitation conclude that there are certain aspects of the activity which benefit from specific input from a facilitator. Here are six which draw on the work of John Heron (1999). Each is illustrated with examples drawn directly from the practice of networked learning communities.

Network facilitation in action...

1 Planning

The facilitator role is to work out how best to help a group achieve its objectives.

Network facilitation in practice...

“The steering group decided to have the third Tuesday of every month completely free of individual school meetings. This freed-up time for specialists to meet up across the network if they so desired.”

Network critical friend

2 Meaning

The facilitator role is to find the best ways of extracting the experiences and knowledge of the individual members of the group.

“I think a skill and ability to see a wider perspective than the school that you’re working in. And it is an ability to take the wider picture and to translate it into practice. It’s about taking those theories and seeing what does that look like when you’re working with children.”

Co-leader/primary headteacher

3 Challenge

The facilitator role is to know when attitudes and statements need to be confronted for the good of the whole group.

“He wasn’t generative in mentioning who’d got the network going and I don’t think that went down too well. So I had to quietly have a word with him and make sure that he did, when he was doing all these things, constantly remember. That sort of commonsense micro-political thing, but very important really.”

Network critical friend

4 Feeling

The facilitator role is to be sensitive to the feelings and emotions which are present in an engaged group and skilled in allowing them to be explored without de-railing the work of the group.

“Through the co-leader work, I came across various publications which I put into a rack outside that’s empty fortunately. I say to staff every staff meeting bring something you’ve read from that publication, and that was a direct commitment from co-leader training. It works – we’ve been doing that now for nearly two years.”

Secondary headteacher

5 Structuring

The facilitator role is to be confident in a good range of learning methods and group techniques and work out how best the group’s learning can be structured.

“Teachers have a lot of knowledge, professionalism, but don’t always have the confidence. They think there’s something mystical about research in some way and it’s a question of encouraging an understanding that some of the things involved are a matter of commonsense. A lot of interpersonal skills need to be involved. I’m respectful of their office, communicative and encouraging, I hope.”

HEI network contact

6 Valuing

The facilitator role is to respect the integrity and diversity of individuals and create a culture in which individuals can grow and be empowered.

“Support staff are coming back absolutely buzzing and it is giving us the confidence to break into lots of different things that are happening. I really think artistically, creatively, through ICT, through many areas, they do have knock-on effects because it’s enabling us and our children to see that they are valued within the community. I think that’s really important.”

Special school headteacher

Action Activity 1: Six aspects of facilitation in networks

Use this space or photocopy this page.

- 1 **Reflect** on the six aspects of facilitation described.
- 2 **Think about** your experiences of facilitating or being facilitated.
- 3 **Identify the key actions** of facilitation *in practice* in your network context which would enable this aspect of activity to be effectively facilitated.

Network facilitation in action...

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2 Meaning

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Network facilitation in practice...

Pause for thought...? Action

Pause for thought...? Action

Pause for thought...? Action

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Activity 2: The practice of effective facilitation in networks

Facilitated learning networks work! They enable people to come together, question their experiences, learn from each other interactively and build new capacity. But it is clear from all those who have been involved in learning networks that the role of facilitation within the network is critically important in determining its success – irrespective of whether this facilitation is provided by an

external consultant, a critical friend or network partner, or an internal member of the network.

In considering the practice of effective facilitation in networks, a useful starting point is to consider the key barriers to and enablers of, successful facilitation which have been identified by participants in learning networks.

Barriers

- 1 When facilitation is understood to be something you have done for or to you.
- 2 When network members perceive that the network leaders, or others in facilitator roles, are there to provide for the network, without recognising the need for reciprocal learning in these relationships.

Enablers

When the space for collaborative learning is formally recognised and facilitated so network participants are able to:

- 1 **Plan together** eg “...the cleaners have as much say in the development plan as does the headteacher.”
- 2 **Train together** eg use of interactive whiteboards or talk2learn.
- 3 **Learn together** eg Investors in People programme, Transforming Learning, Collaborative Leadership Learning.
- 4 **Draw collective knowledge** from joint data sources eg My Voice survey, analysis of network performance data.

“ I’m an ex-teacher. I flatter myself that I still remember some bits about it, enough to make myself informed, but I haven’t actually taught in a classroom for five years now. The skill, the expertise, the knowledge, rests with practitioners, so you don’t walk in and tell the teachers how to do it. ”

HEI network link

“ I think for too long now we have had courses laid on, whether it is at a local level or further afield. It’s actually okay, you have some very standard training going on, but this is slightly deeper I think and thought provoking. And I like that, that’s exciting... ”

Special school headteacher

In addressing the ways in which these enabling factors might be built into network facilitation and these barriers might be overcome, the following characteristics of effective facilitation in school networks have been identified by network participants. The key to this way of working is the orientation of the facilitators role as being focused on enabling network participants to engage in collaborative learning as part of an ongoing developmental process.

The actions of effective facilitation

- Facilitating action research or enquiry processes which encourage reflective practices and provide formal opportunities for reflection on practice.
- Generating a buzz about learning amongst network participants in a variety of contexts (eg conferences, events, working groups, steering groups, training sessions, study or enquiry groups).
- Supporting a position where learning is seen to be an ongoing process for *all* network members irrespective of their role or position in the school hierarchy ie where learning is not perceived to cease because of role (eg headteacher).
- Creating a collaborative learning environment in which all network members feel comfortable asking questions (eg questions about the language, policies and reasons behind things, about the long-term view and approaches).

Action Activity 2: The practice of effective facilitation in networks

Use this space or photocopy this page.

- 1 Test out** your assumptions about effective facilitation by looking at the statements below.
- 2 Examine** the statements and identify those which you agree with and those which you disagree with.
- 3 Explore** the reasons for your choices describing why you made this selection – identify the cases in which the answer might be more subtle than a simple yes or no.

An effective facilitator...

- Always lets participants know what is coming next.
- Always gives the big picture.
- Listens more than talks.
- Never stops an activity when it is going well.
- Changes the activity every 20 minutes.
- Encourages participation.
- Always has food and water available.
- Always leaves it to individuals to decide which groups to work in.
- Never offers only one method.
- Always offers only one method.
- Spends time getting to know people.
- Jumps straight in to an activity to get people working together.
- Starts with safe topics.
- Starts with difficult topics.
- Never takes a vote.
- Only takes a vote when s/he knows what the result will be.
- Always does what the majority want to do.

Pause for thought...? Action

What are we learning about...?

The 'What are we learning about...?' series is designed to make public the learning that has emerged from NLCs in the last two years.

The first six titles in the series will focus on:

What are we learning about...?

- LEA involvement in school networks
- **Establishing a network of schools**
- The impact of school networks
- Professional development within school networks
- Leadership within school networks
- Sustaining a network of schools

To order a copy of this publication and others in this series, please email **nlc@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference **WAWLA/Establishing a network of schools**

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